



## Lunch Box Tips for Parents: What to Pack for Young Children in Childcare

Janice Fletcher, EdD, Beth Price, Samantha Ramsay, PhD, RD, LD, Laurel Branen, PhD, RD, LD

Foods in children's lunch boxes can provide the nutrients children need to support their growth and development. Those foods also provide children with enjoyment and pleasure at mealtimes, especially when children are given the opportunity to taste and eat foods they like, while also being exposed to new foods.

Here are suggestions that offer safe foods and optimize nutrients in a child's lunch:

- Never pack foods that are choking hazards. These include:
  - Hard raw vegetables and fruits such as raw carrot sticks or raw celery sticks
  - Whole grapes
  - Nuts and seeds
  - Firm, hard raisins or other dried fruit
  - Hot dogs
  - Large chunks of cheese or meat
  - Hard candy and chewing gum
  - Chunks of peanut butter
  - Marshmallows
- Prevent choking. Chop food into cubes that are no bigger than ½ inch diameter for children over three and ¼ inch for children under three.
- Aim to offer foods from low-fat meat and dairy sources.
- Select whole grain breads, cereals, and crackers.
- Offer fruits and vegetables.
- Carefully select beverages that are high in nutrients. Milk is the preferred beverage for children. Check to see if your child's center offers milk, or at least refrigeration for the lunch box, so that you can send milk for your child. If you send fruit juice in the lunch box, send 100% fruit juice, not juice cocktails or juice punch.
- Children's lunch boxes can include a dessert that is healthy and nutritious. Examples are oatmeal cookies, or pudding that has added (fortified) calcium. Read labels.
- Avoid packing foods that are high risk for causing food borne illness, unless the center has equipment to keep cold foods cold and equipment to reheat foods to appropriate temperatures. Even the best lunch boxes rarely keep foods cold enough to be safe.
- **These foods must be kept cold during storage:** milk, hummus, cheese spreads, dressing or dips, lunch meat, yogurt, eggs, cheese, pasta salad, juice box or reheated leftover meals such as lasagna/spaghetti, cooked vegetables, soup, chili, casseroles, cooked vegetables.  
**These foods are safe at room temperature:** crackers, whole fruits, cereal, bread sticks, unopened fruit cups, scones, muffins, breads.



## Foods to Pack in Lunchboxes for Children in Child Care

Samantha Ramsay, Janice Fletcher, Beth Price, Laurel Branen

**Select one from each category below**

### SANDWICH/ENTRÉE/SOUP

Thinly spread peanut butter and jelly sandwich Tuna, turkey, ham, beef, cheese or egg salad sandwich Hummus pita or wrap Chicken noodle or tomato soup Cream cheese sandwich Fish filet sandwiches *Chopped boiled eggs	Chili Lasagna/spaghetti/ravioli Pizza *Chicken pasta salad Tortilla with cheese and refried beans Chicken or turkey wrap Black beans and rice
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### GRAIN/BREADS

Graham crackers Fish crackers Scones Muffins Biscuits Cornbread	Cereal English muffins Pita bread *Granola bar Couscous salad Rice
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### FRUIT

Whole bananas *Peeled and sliced peaches, apricots, pears, and plum *Strawberry quartered Tangerine, orange, or grapefruit sections *Raspberries Cooked apples	Blueberries *Fruit cups in water or light syrup *Dehydrated fruit *Pineapple chopped into quarter inch cubes Kiwi *Blackberries quartered *Mango and papaya
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### VEGETABLE

Cooked green beans *Chopped salad with dressing (spinach, lettuce) *Slivered carrots *Cucumbers chopped in 1/4 inch cubes *Shredded jicama and dip	Potato wedges Sliced tomatoes *Chopped red, yellow, and orange peppers Cooked broccoli Corn *Black and green chopped olives
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### MILK/DAIRY

Milk *String cheese or cheese in 1/4 or 1/2 inch cubes	Cottage cheese Yogurt
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### BEVERAGE

Milk Flavored Milk	Water 100% Fruit Juice
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\*Be sure to prepare these foods to prevent choking hazards. For children under age three, chop into pieces no bigger than 1/4 inch in diameter. For children under age five, chop into pieces no bigger than 1/2 inch in diameter.



### Interesting Resources for Lunch Boxes for Young Children in Child Care

- Accredited Practicing Dietitians, F. D. C. (2004). Healthy lunch box ideas: save time, money, and effort [Electronic Version]. Retrieved June 25, 2009 from [http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/familydaycare/files/links/2\\_Healthy\\_Lunch\\_Box\\_Ideas.pdf](http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/familydaycare/files/links/2_Healthy_Lunch_Box_Ideas.pdf)
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- Satter, Ellyn (2009) Retrieved June 26, 2009, from <http://www.ellynsatter.com>
- Sweitzer, S., Briley, M., Robert-Gray, C. (2009). Do sack lunches provided by parents meet the nutritional needs of young children who attend child care? *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*. January, 2009. 109: 141-144

## **Lunch Boxes with Young Children in Child Care Settings Teacher and Center Strategies**

Janice Fletcher, EdD, Beth Price, Samantha Ramsay, PhD, RD, LD, Laurel Branen, PhD, RD, LD

When young children eat a meal brought from home, an attentive and intentional teacher at the table is critical to keep children safe and secure. Teachers at the lunch box table support learning about food and eating behaviors as they sit with children. In extreme cases where a teacher is distracted, children may not eat at all if they do not get help opening their food.

Have a serious strategy- rich discussion among staff about what provides the best possible lunch box mealtime. Make a list of ways to have a safe, relaxed, stimulating lunch box environment. Consider routines and schedules, setting the table environment, the food, children's developmental skills and learning, safety and sanitation, staff roles, and working with families. Use the strategies below to jump-start your discussion.

### **Routines and Schedules**

- Develop routines for getting lunch boxes to the table. For example, have a routine so the table is set with plates and utensils before children come to the table. Children can help with this.
- Set lunch boxes out and have them open prior to the children coming to the table.
- Schedule lunch box meals to include time for getting the food out of the packaging, as well as time for eating and interacting.
- Plan schedules and routines that make transitions to and from the mealtime efficient.
- When children come to the table, make certain each has at least one thing to eat or drink as they wait for the other children to get their items opened or heated.
- Help children learn to time their eating, even in the face of a stimulating environment. Use phrases to designate the beginning of the mealtime, the middle of the mealtime, and the end of the mealtime. Talk about getting plates filled with the food from the lunch box, then beginning to eat the food, then how starting to feel full and then, as the mealtime comes to an end, beginning to clear off the table and getting ready to wash hands.
- Have an end-of-mealtime transition plan for closing and returning lunch boxes to children's cubbies.



## Setting the Table Environment

- Provide plates, utensils, and napkins for the meal. Provide child-sized utensils that are restaurant grade plastic, or stainless steel. Offer plates that are sturdy so that wet foods do not leak through and heavier foods do not make the plate unstable.
- Have a plan for where to put the lunch boxes while the children eat. For example, have children take all the food out of the boxes and place it on plates, then remove the boxes from the table to a nearby shelf.
- Have child-sized pitchers of water and milk at the table for children to pour into cups provided by the center.
- If microwave ovens are used, be certain they are near the table, so the teacher does not have to go too far to heat foods.
- Roll a table-side cart near the teacher's chair. Put plates, cups, utensils, napkins, paper towels for spills and clean up, and milk or juice pitchers on the cart. Be sure there are extra utensils and equipment on the cart. Include a small clip board and pen with a stack of blank "daily eating sheets" for the teacher to put in each child's lunch box.
- Place a trash can within easy reach of the teacher so trash from accumulated food packaging can be disposed of quickly. This keeps the table environment more organized and appealing, as well as removing possible choking hazards.

## Child Development and Learning

- Encourage competence in children as they learn eating skills. Ask children if they want help opening items, rather than automatically opening the food for the child.
- Teach children to ask for help, and to wait their turn for the teacher to help.
- Because children bring their food, there is an inherent interest factor in what each has brought from home. Encourage child-to-child discussions about their food, but teach the words, yours and mine and ours. Because brought-from-home food is not 100% reliable in terms of choking hazards or contamination, make and enforce a routine of no sharing.
- Build food vocabulary among the children taking advantage of the wide variety of different foods the children bring to the table...smooth, silky, crunchy, colors, flavors, crispness, liquid, solid, fruits, vegetables, meat, grains, dairy.
- Help children learn how to open items that commonly come in lunchboxes...juice boxes and sandwich bags are examples. Plan a small group time activity or have a dramatic play center set up for such learning.

- Determine what strategies or rules will be used for supporting children as they make choices of what and whether to eat food from their lunchboxes. If a variety of nutrient-dense foods arrive in a child's lunch box, it is easy to accept that the child will be gaining adequate nutrition at lunch, no matter what they choose from their meal. Prevailing research suggests that adults should decide what is presented to eat and the child decides how much or whether to eat (Satter Division of Responsibility in Feeding, 2009). Working with parents on what is presented in the lunch box is essential.
- The variety of food that children bring and the ways they eat those foods make the typical lunch box table look something akin to a three-ring circus. This interesting lunch scene attracts and distracts children around the table. Have a repertoire of phrases to help children stay on task as they eat and to help them attend to the food they are eating. Examples are, "I see you have applesauce." "Are you enjoying your sandwich?" "Your soup has noodles." "You opened your yogurt and got your spoon ready to eat it." "You ate your potato and then you started on peaches in your fruit cup."

## Safety and Sanitation

- Arrange routines for getting started, so the teacher can be at the table with all the children as they sit down and begin eating. Children should never be left alone with the plethora of choking hazards and challenges found in the food and packaging in the lunch box.
- Be certain teachers practice fastidious hand washing and wear plastic gloves to remove food from children's lunch boxes.
- It is common for children's lunch boxes to include foods that are possible choking hazards, such as raisins, raw carrots, grapes, and nuts. Send parents a list of foods that are choking hazards and therefore not acceptable for bringing to the program. Because children will sometimes bring the unsafe foods anyway, it is especially important for teachers to be prepared to know what to do when a child chokes on food. Insist on annual training on CPR and First Aid.
- Do not return partially eaten food, food that has been opened, or food that must be refrigerated or heated to a lunch box. Sometimes child care providers want parents to see the results of a child's mealtime consumption. They may return uneaten food to the lunch box. This practice presents a food safety hazard. Note that it is fairly common for situations to arise where a child may cry, or say, "I'm hungry," on the way home. Parents look in the lunch box for leftover tidbits to quiet and satisfy the child. Parents may even pack the uneaten food in the next day's lunch box. Food that has been partially eaten is contaminated and becomes a growing medium for bacteria. Staff can inform parents about how much their child ate, using putting a simple "daily eating sheet" in the child's lunch box. (See below in the Working with Parents section.)



- Sometime a child has a food allergy that is so severe, that even what seems like minor contact with that food can cause a serious, even deadly reaction. Parents of all of the children must be alerted to the prohibition of the food item from lunch boxes. Careful scrutiny of all the children's lunch boxes for the allergen must be conducted.

## Staff Roles

- Make sure teacher-child ratios allow an adult to sit with children at each table.
- Ideally a lunch aide in the room can move around helping children with food packaging and preparation, while an adult sits at the tables with children.
- Staff should eat a bit of food for modeling, but they should not be required to eat their true meal during this time. Lunch box service obligations are so demanding that staff hardly have time to eat. They typically spend a majority of time opening, serving, and keeping children safe with the food from their lunch boxes. Absolute attention to the children and their lunches is essential for safety reasons. A bonus, after safety, is helping children learn to self-regulate, to establish food preferences, to choose amounts to eat, and to learn about being in a group at mealtimes.
- Be mindful of the number of times the teacher has to get up and down from the table. Efficient routines, well-placed mealtime equipment, and appropriate ratios can support the teacher to focus attention on supporting children.

## The Food

- Children need a variety of food. Offer suggestions to parents that include foods from different food groups. See "Lunch Box Tips for Parents: What to Pack in Lunch Boxes for Young Children in Childcare." <http://www.cals.uidaho.edu/feeding>
- Write a policy to guide parents as they select food for their children's lunches.
- Always offer water at the table. Offer milk to supplement children's lunch box/sack lunches. This is wise, since studies of lunch box and sack lunch meals for young children show insufficient levels of calcium in the food sent from home (Sweitzer, Briley, and Robert-Gray, 2009).
- Children can independently pour water and milk from child sized pitchers to their cups, increasing their intake of fluids and calcium while also helping develop hand skills.
- Sometimes children have too little food in their lunch box. Be sure to have some non-perishable items (crackers, cereal, pretzels) on hand to supplement their lunches.





## Working with Parents around Food from Home

- Distribute the handout for parents called, “Lunch Box Tips for Parents: Lunch Boxes for Young Children in Child Care Settings” and “Lunch Box Tips for Parents: What to Pack in Lunch Boxes for Young Children in Childcare.” <http://www.cals.uidaho.edu/feeding>
- If lunch boxes routinely include foods that are high in fat, sugar, and sodium, and low in milk items and fruits or vegetables, then parent education becomes essential. Policies from the center about what foods are appropriate offer a teacher or administrator a common tool for helping increase the nutrient value of the lunch box foods in the center.
- Be certain that parents know if the program has equipment for heating and refrigerating foods. This impacts what parents send for the child’s lunch and how it is prepared.
- Have a family-friendly plan to refrigerate lunches. Place a rolling cart or large basket near the door where children arrive. Parents or children can place lunch boxes or sacks on the cart or in the basket. Take the lunches for storage in a refrigerator.
- If the center cannot provide refrigeration for lunches, be certain parents do not pack perishable items, even if they use thermal lunch boxes or ice packs. Researchers have tested temperatures using both of these and have found them to be inadequate for keeping food safe (Sweitzer, Briley, and Robert-Gray, 2009).
- Identify choking hazards for parents and make policies that prohibit these from lunch boxes. Foods that are common choking hazards for young children are raisins, uncooked carrots and hard raw vegetables, grapes, nuts, chunks of peanut butter, chunks of meat, hard candies, lollipops, popcorn, and whole hotdogs or hotdogs cut in rounds. Suggest that parents cut grapes in half, or fourths, chop nuts, thinly spread peanut butter on bread or crackers, chop chunks of food, cut hotdogs lengthwise into quarters.
- Encourage parents to cut items such as sandwiches or pizza into small pieces for ease of eating by the child. Quarter size works for sandwiches, for example. This helps children eat more efficiently and comfortably.
- Encourage parents to package food so that children can have success. Suggest they use wax paper instead of plastic wrap. Plastic wrap sticks together while wax paper does not. Encourage parents to practice the skills for opening items at home, just as you will do at the center. Suggest that parents snip the seals on pre-packaged dry food before putting food in the lunch box. For foods that are highly packaged, suggest emptying the food into a baggie before putting it in the lunch box.
- Talk with parents about portion sizes of foods that are appropriate for their child’s unique needs. Regularly report how much of the lunch the parents prepared is eaten by their child. Avoid sending uneaten food back home in the lunchbox. This practice poses a food safety issue.





## Using a Daily Sheet

Use a daily eating sheet for staff to mark what a child ate. Place the report in the child's lunch box right from the table. Keep this sheet simple. Keep a small clipboard on the cart-side table with forms for each child.

If there is an exceptional amount of food eaten or not eaten, then a face to face conversation is necessary and would not be communicated via a daily sheet.

<b>SAMPLE</b>				
<b>Child Care Lunch Box Daily Sheet</b>				
Day _____	Child's Name _____	Staff _____		
<b>FOOD ITEM</b>	<b>AMOUNT EATEN</b>			
	NONE	FOURTH	HALF	ALL
Sandwich/entrée/soup	x _____	x _____	x _____	x _____
Beverage	x _____	x _____	x _____	x _____
Fruit	x _____	x _____	x _____	x _____
Vegetables	x _____	x _____	x _____	x _____
Grains/ breads/ crackers/chips	x _____	x _____	x _____	x _____
Cookies/pudding/jello/cake	x _____	x _____	x _____	x _____
Other _____	x _____	x _____	x _____	x _____



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Sending a lunch box along with your child to a child care program connects you, your child, and the child care staff in an intimate way. Eating is essential to survival.

Supporting children to be healthy and happy around mealtimes is an adult responsibility that is dependent upon both the parent and the staff. Here are suggestions for building a bridge among parents, staff, and the children who eat the food from the lunch box.

- Ask about meal service style. Find out if the program provides beverages or partial meals, utensils, napkins, or plates.
- Ask staff if the program has a refrigerator to store lunch box food that must be maintained at a cool temperature. If yes, find out how to access the refrigerator when you bring your child's lunch box to the program.
- Ask if the program has a way to heat foods that must be cooked. If yes, use microwave-safe containers. Read container packaging to be certain.
- Present items in an easy-to-eat fashion that is friendly to a child's mouth and chewing and swallowing skills. For example, cut sandwiches into four quarters. Slice pizza into small squares. Offer items that do not require slicing or peeling. Remember the teacher has many children to help at the meal. The teacher will also be helping keep children safe and happy, as well as supporting them in getting their food ready to eat.
- Keep serving sizes small. Watch your child eat at home, and then pack about that size portion for lunch. Ask how much your child typically eats at the child care program.
- Pack foods that can make your child feel successful. Think about your child's skills for opening items independently.
- Be considerate to your child's teacher. Pack items that are reasonably easy to open and that do not require a lot of preparation. Use wax paper instead of plastic wrap, for example. Plastic wrap sticks together while wax paper does not. Practice at home with children to open containers. If you buy prepackaged foods, snip the seals before putting them in the lunch box. For foods that are highly packaged, empty the food into an easy to open container before you put the food in the lunch box.
- When food in the lunch box needs to be refrigerated, be sure to follow the center's rules for getting the lunch box in the cooler.
- Check to be certain water for the children to drink is readily available at the table.



- Choose foods that represent good nutrition. Offer meats dairy, fruits, vegetables, and grains. Offer these in the lunchbox, and trust the teacher to help your child learn to eat these foods.
- Be careful of emotional decision making about what goes into the meal. Sometimes parents feel guilty about leaving their children, and try to make up for that guilt by filling a lunch box with treats. Remember...this is the child's nutrition for a large portion of the day. Thoughtfully choose the best food you can for your child.
- Some child care programs encourage staff to return uneaten food in the lunch box. This is a hazard to your child. Though you may be able to see what your child ate, the chance of food borne illness is present in food that has been tasted. Do not re-use the food. Discard the food, and clean the lunch box thoroughly. *Note: Sometimes children are hungry or cranky on the way home from child care. Resist the dangerous temptation to feed the child food from the already used lunch box.*
- You will want to know what your child ate at their child care meal(s). Ask staff if the center might provide you with a daily eating sheet that helps you know how much the child ate.
- Clean your child's lunch box daily. Be sure to use a disinfectant.
- Pack a little extra love in the lunchbox. Send a token of your affection in the lunch box. This can be a little picture you draw on a piece of paper, a simple note, a picture of you printed from the computer, or something you cut out of the news or from a magazine.



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### GRAIN/BREADS

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### FRUIT

Whole bananas *Peeled and sliced peaches, apricots, pears, and plum *Strawberry quartered Tangerine, orange, or grapefruit sections *Raspberries Cooked apples	Blueberries *Fruit cups in water or light syrup *Dehydrated fruit *Pineapple chopped into quarter inch cubes Kiwi *Blackberries quartered *Mango and papaya
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### VEGETABLE

Cooked green beans *Chopped salad with dressing (spinach, lettuce) *Slivered carrots *Cucumbers chopped in 1/4 inch cubes *Shredded jicama and dip	Potato wedges Sliced tomatoes *Chopped red, yellow, and orange peppers Cooked broccoli Corn *Black and green chopped olives
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### MILK/DAIRY

Milk *String cheese or cheese in 1/4 or 1/2 inch cubes	Cottage cheese Yogurt
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### BEVERAGE

Milk Flavored Milk	Water 100% Fruit Juice
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